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Senate

Statement of Senator Dianne Feinstein

“Celebrating the 10th Anniversary of the California Desert Protection Act”

Mrs. FEINSTEIN: Mr. President, ten years ago this fall, President Bill Clinton signed the California Desert Protection Act into law, preserving 7.7 million acres of stunning landscape for generations to come.

With the passage of this legislation, the largest parks and wilderness bill to impact the lower 48 states was enacted, thereby establishing Joshua Tree National Park, Death Valley National Park and the Mojave National Preserve.

Protecting these beautiful lands stands as one of my proudest legislative accomplishments to this day.

The California Desert is home to remarkable archaeology, beauty and wildlife – some of the last remaining dinosaur tracks, Native American petroglyphs, abundant spring wildflowers, and threatened species including the bighorn sheep and the desert tortoise, an animal known to live for as many as 100 years.

And each of the parks created by the Act has its own unique beauty. Joshua Tree, encompassing parts of both the Mojave Desert and the Colorado Desert, contains magnificent rock formations and forests which blanket the high country throughout the park. The abundant yellow creosote bushes of the eastern side of the park are mirrored by the rugged Joshua Trees to the west.

The Death Valley landscape, marked by a diverse range of salt playas, alpine forests, and jagged rocks, is a land of extremes – one of the hottest,

driest, and lowest places on Earth. At Dante’s View, a visitor may look down into Badwater, the lowest place in the western hemisphere and, on a clear day, look west to Mt. Whitney, the highest point in the lower 48 states.

Mojave National Preserve, with its granite, limestone, and metamorphic rocks, has a remarkable geological diversity, as well as the largest Joshua Tree forest in the world. Many of the Preserve’s peaks are a vivid pink at the top, the result of a volcanic explosion more than 18 million years ago in Arizona that sent deposits flying through the air and flowing across the land to the Mojave Desert.

The California Desert Protection Act ensured that these lands would be preserved for years to come. In total, the Act raised the protection level for 9 million acres of parks and wilderness.

Since 2000 the wilderness area has been expanded even further with the purchase of nearly 600,000 acres of land primarily in and around the Mojave National Preserve. The transaction, the largest conservation acquisition of private lands in U.S. history, combined federal Land and Water Conservation Fund appropriations with funding from the Wildlands Conservancy to buy discounted land owned by the Catellus Development Corporation.

This expansion protected 200,000 acres of critical habitat for the endangered desert tortoise, 150,000 acres for bighorn sheep, the largest

cactus gardens in the world at Bigelow Cholla Gardens and rights-of-way for 165 trails and access roads leading to 3.7 million additional acres of land used for hunting, hiking and camping.

Visitors have taken advantage of these abundant recreation and research opportunities in the California Desert. Last year, 2.8 million people traveled to Joshua Tree and Death Valley national parks and the Mojave National Preserve. In turn, these visitors provided an economic boost of approximately \$100 million at nearby hotels, restaurants, and other local businesses.

Now, as we celebrate the ten-year anniversary of the California Desert Protection Act, the preservation of our national park system has never been more important. Population growth, especially in the western United States, is placing increased pressure on our public lands. That is why it was so critical that we acted ten years ago and why it is urgent that we continue to preserve our Nation’s natural treasures today.

Unfortunately, there is much evidence that our national parks are not receiving the funding or attention they deserve. A recent survey of 12 national parks by the Coalition of Concerned National Park Service Retirees found that six parks had either reduced or planned to reduce visitor center hours or days of operation. The survey also found that all 12 parks had recently cut full-time or seasonal staff positions.

One of the parks surveyed, Death Valley, reduced its law enforcement positions from 23 several years ago to 15 at the time of the study. More than 600 miles of backcountry roads are inadequately secured leaving natural resources, wildlife and visitors less safe.

Meanwhile, the backlog of maintenance projects in our parks has grown to a range of \$4 billion to \$6.8 billion, according to the Government Accountability Office. Throughout our national park system, roads, bridges, and historic structures are falling into disrepair, trails and campgrounds are poorly maintained, and visitor centers are becoming outdated.

Additionally, a recent report by the Environmental Protection Agency designated eight national parks, including Joshua Tree, as containing excessively high levels of ozone. It is alarming to know that the air at some of our national parks is harmful, especially since the problem of poor air quality in these regions was identified for action under the Clean Air Act in 1977.

Our national parks are America's natural treasures. They make the beauty of our Nation accessible to all Americans and, indeed, visitors from around the world. We have a responsibility to preserve these places for the enjoyment of generations to come.

Enacting the California Desert Protection Act was an important step toward that end. Now, we must continue to work to ensure that the parks we have already established, and those we may yet protect, have the resources they need.